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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 001102

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [FR](#)

SUBJECT: GULF COUNTRIES A GROWING PRIORITY FOR FRANCE

REF: PARIS 832

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Kathy Allegrone for Reasons  
1.4(b), (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Taking a cue from President Sarkozy's personal interest in the region, the French MFA has devoted increasing attention and staff to their bilateral relations with Gulf countries since 2007, according to the MFA's three Gulf Country Desk Officers. Qatar still maintains a privileged position, but relations with Saudi Arabia have improved, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has become a key new focus for France. Though France has significant commercial interests in the Gulf, military relations and security concerns, especially with regard to Yemen and Iran, currently occupy center stage. Indeed, worries about Yemen and Iran have the attention of senior officials at the French MFA. While the Desk Officers believe all the Gulf countries perceive the threat posed by Iran as acute, they report that only Saudi Arabia recognizes the potentially destabilizing force Yemen could become. As to Iraq, the French claim to have actively encouraged Gulf nations to send Ambassadors to Baghdad in order to re-establish formal diplomatic relations. Moreover, the Desk Officers predicted that negotiations on the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the European Union (EU) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) will not be completed anytime soon, and they reported that all of the Gulf countries except Oman seem interested in attaining civilian nuclear power. Lastly, they admitted that France generally avoids engaging Gulf countries in discussions of human rights and democratic reforms. END SUMMARY.

GULF OFFICE GETS ONLY STAFF INCREASE IN MFA MID-EAST BUREAU  
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¶2. (C) During wide-ranging discussions with poloffs at the end of July, the MFA's Gulf Country Desk Officers -- Guillaume Henry, Thibault Cornut-Gentille, and Rafael Justine -- said the Gulf continues to grow in importance for the GOF. In order to provide better coverage for the region, a third Desk Officer has been assigned to cover the Gulf, representing the only personnel increase in the entire Middle East bureau. The officers explained the MFA's attention to the Gulf reflects the personal interest in the region of President Sarkozy, who has now traveled to all Gulf countries except Yemen and Iran. He meets frequently with Qatari Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani (six times) and visited Saudi Arabia twice in 2008. Additionally, France's recently signed security agreement with the UAE and the basing of French forces there (reftel) have earned France a key military partner in the region.

SPECIAL TIES WITH QATAR, IMPROVING TIES WITH SAUDI ARABIA  
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¶3. (C) Henry said France's ongoing prioritization of Qatar has less to do with strategic concerns than with President

Sarkozy's personal relationship with Qatari leaders, many of whom he knew before becoming President, as well as with Qatar's status as a regional financial power. The June state visit of the Qatari Emir to Paris reflected the ongoing importance of this bilateral relationship. France also continues to hold military exercises with Qatari forces, and the GOF has considered proposing a military agreement with Qatar similar to the one they signed with the UAE, though Henry added that such an agreement is not currently on the table. President Sarkozy has also worked to improve French relations with Saudi Arabia, which suffered after France deepened its ties with Qatar, a key Saudi rival. Sarkozy's two visits to Saudi Arabia in 2008 were positive overall, and Sarkozy was successful during his November trip in calming Saudi fears about France's proactive engagement with Syria following Sarkozy's official visit to Damascus earlier that fall. Henry noted, however, that Sarkozy will never develop the same close, personal relationship with Saudi King Abdullah that he enjoys with the Qatari Emir.

#### CONCERNS ABOUT YEMEN AND IRAN

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¶4. (C) France sees Yemen and Iran as the two major security concerns in the Gulf, although Henry complained that only Saudi Arabia seems to appreciate the threat posed by instability in Yemen. (NOTE: MFA Middle East Director (A/S equivalent) Patrice Paoli told Political Minister Counselor August 11 that France is seriously concerned about the deteriorating political and security situation in Yemen. He asked if it would be possible to discuss with the French any USG plans or ideas for improving the situation. "What is the American vision for Yemen?," he asked. END NOTE.)

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¶5. (C) The French believe that most of the Gulf states share a perception of the threat posed by Iran as acute, the Desk Officers said. Cornut-Gentile suggested that Oman is less worried due to its historically good relations with Iran. Qatar, however, is even more worried than its neighbors, according to Henry. For Qatar, the French believe, several factors have imbued its leadership with a deep-seated fear of Tehran: geographic proximity, Qatar's small size, Wahhabi fear of Shiism, and the North Field/South Pars gas deposit it shares with Iran. Unlike most of their neighbors, the Qataris have responded with active diplomatic engagement, such as the July visit of the Qatari Armed Forces Chief of Staff Hamad Al-Atiyah to Tehran.

¶6. (C) Despite a shared fear of Iran among Gulf states, Henry said multilateral defense cooperation seems a remote prospect. While France has tried to promote defense cooperation among Gulf states, the GOF remains pessimistic that these efforts will bear fruit. Henry mentioned that trilateral military exercises with Qatar and the UAE in March 2008 was very wheel-and-spoke, with France acting as a go-between for UAE and Qatari military leaders, who did not work well together. Nevertheless, France intends to repeat these exercises, with the additional participation of Kuwaiti forces, although no date has been set yet.

#### IRAQ, GCC-EU FREE TRADE AGREEMENT, NUCLEAR TECHNOLOGY

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¶7. (C) Henry said the French have actively encouraged the other Gulf nations for at least a year to send Ambassadors to Baghdad in order to re-establish their formal diplomatic relations with Iraq.

¶8. (C) All three officers agreed that negotiations on the EU-GCC Free Trade Agreement (FTA) will not be completed anytime soon. The French treated the FTA as a high priority when they assumed the rotating EU presidency (between July and December 2008), but the Czechs took little interest during their subsequent EU presidency (January to June 2009).

Henry said Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt announced that the FTA will be a priority during the Swedish presidency (July to December 2009) though Henry doubted they would succeed in revitalizing talks. "They are not well placed to unblock problems," he explained. The Spanish Presidency (January to June 2010), by contrast, Henry argued, might make progress. In any case, the stalled FTA negotiations do not prevent the development of closer political relations between the EU and the GCC, Justine said.

¶9. (C) The Desk Officers also reported that Bahrain has advanced the furthest, among the Gulf countries, toward the acquisition of civil nuclear technology. All of the Gulf countries except Oman seem interested in attaining nuclear power. The French are currently bidding for contracts, Henry said, noting that they are competing with U.S. bids.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATIC REFORM  
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¶10. (C) The Desk Officers said that France generally avoids engaging Gulf countries on sensitive issues such as human rights and democratic reform. The GOF often "delegates" these issues to the EU. Sometimes the French do raise specific issues at a bilateral level, Henry said, and they will often salute any progress achieved, such as the inclusion of female candidates in Saudi municipal elections.  
PEKALA